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"On Eagles' Wing": The History of the Yemeni Jews and Their Exodus to the *Promised Land*

1. Introduction

Following the rise of the Islamic faith 13 centuries earlier, many branches of Islam found fertile ground in Yemen, such as the Zaydis[1] (occasionally known as Fiver Shiites) and Ismailis within the Shiites "partisans" and the Shafis within the Sunnis "traditionalists".[2] As a result, by the middle of the 20th century, the religious population of the country was basically divided into two parts: minority Israelites and majority Muslims. The size of the Israeli community in Yemen at that time was more than 50,000. By the end of the 1950s, however, about 99 % of this community had left the country and emigrated to the State of Israel, established in 1948, via the rescue Operation "On Eagles' Wings" – which was unofficially referred to only as the "Magic Carpet" – to establish a new home in the *Promised Land*. The occurrence of such large-scale emigration cannot be explained solely by religious reasons. The issue is much more complex than this, which we would like to highlight in this study.

1 Zaidiyyah or Zaidism is one of the Shia sects, which emerged in the 8th century from Shi'a Islam. Followers of Zaydis make up about 25 % of Muslims in Yemen, with the greatest majority of Shia Muslims there.

2 85 % of Muslims in all over the world are Sunnis.

2. The Situation of the Jewish Community in Antiquity

The settlement of the ancestors of the Yemeni Jews in southern Arabia dates back thousands of years before Christ, and many different traditions have entered the public consciousness about the reasons for this. According to one of them, members of the Jewish group that migrated to the territory of present-day Yemen for the first time opposed with Moses during the exodus.[3] According to another story, the first settlers in Arabia were members of the Jewish army who marched there at the command of Moses and reaped victory over the Amalekites[4][5]. Again, according to another theory, they presumably came to the area as merchants, accompanied by the Queen of Sheba, who visited King Solomon, between 965 and 925 BC.[6] Also popular is the origins that the ancestors of the Yemeni Jewish community settled in Sanaa region 42 years before the demolition of the first great temple in Jerusalem in 586 BC. As a result of Jeremiah's prophecy of the destruction of the city and its people, 75,000 crossed the Jordan River to follow in Moses's footsteps in the desert. Reaching the city of Edom, however, they turned south and continued their way until they reached southern Arabia.[7] Historians conclude that the period of Babylonian captivity was also authoritative in the settlement of Jews in Arabia, who were brought into the area as slaves. In connection with the latter, it was pointed out that when the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Nabonidus (556–539 BC), conquered North Hijaz to the present-day Medina, several of the occupied cities listed on his inscription of victory later became known as Jewish

3 Parfitt, Tudor. *The Road to Redemption: The Jews of the Yemen 1900–1950*. Leiden: E J Brill, 1996: 3.

4 According to the Midrash: Amalekites were sorcerers who could transform themselves to resemble animals, in order to avoid capture.

5 Newby, Gordon Darnell. *A History of the Jews of Arabia.* South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 1988: 14–15.

6 The Queen of Sheba is believed to be Queen Bilquis of Saba which was located in the territory of present-day Yemen. For a brief summary of the Queen's visit see: Taibah, Nadia Jameel – MacDonald, Margaret Read. *Folktales from the Arabian Peninsula. Tales of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen*. World Folklore Series, Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2016: 71. For more details see: The Old Testament, First Book of Kings, chapter 10.

7 Barer, Shlomo. *The Magic Carpet*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1952: 113.

settlements.[8] It is probable that a larger proportion of their settlement took place after the second demolition of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in AD 70.[9]

Their colonies were initially concentrated in Barash, near Jabal Nuqum.[10] With the boom in trade, they continued to expand and soon represented themselves at major stations on the Incense Trade Route in the area. Gradually, they gained wealth and influence, forming not only a trading commune, but also a community of warriors who were able to defend themselves and assert their interests over others. In addition, their relationship with Palestine was still intense at the time; even in the 3rd century, the Jewish inhabitants of Sanaa region sent the earthly remains of people who had previously played an important role in their community to Palestine to find final peace there.[11]

In parallel with Judaism, Arian Christianity gained significant influence in southern Arabia during the 4th century.[12] However, not only did the Jews effectively resist Christian missionary propaganda, but thanks to their successful conversion efforts, they further increased the size of their community, culminating in the Judaism of the Himyarite Royal Court, and the conversion of the Jewish religion into a state religion during the reign of King (Tubba) Abu Karib As'ad (385–420 AD).[13] However, their influence on the top management of the state did not prove to be long-lived. The

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8 Newby, Gordon Darnell. "A History of the Jews of Arabia": 20–21.

9 Parfitt, Tudor. "The Road to Redemption …": 7.

10 It is a summit in Yemen elevated 2,889 meters and it is situated west of Jabal Barash.

11 Macro, Eric. *Yemen and the Western World*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 1968: 84.

12 In 341–346 AD, Patriarch Theophilus sent a Syrian missionary to southern Arabia who established a bishopric in addition to his successful conversion work. Emperor Constantine II. also sent a Christian mission to the region in 356. The mission was led by Theophilus Indus, who built, among other things, the earliest Christian church in Aden, Southern Arabia.
Little, Tom. *South Arabia, Arena of Conflict*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968: 4.; Stookey, Robert W. *Yemen, The Politics of the Yemen Arab Republic*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1978: 20.

13 In addition to religious considerations, serious political ideas presumably played a role in the adoption of the Jewish faith. Former rulers in the country have only recently succeeded in eliminating polytheism in the name of centralization. The court then turned its attention to monotheistic religions and foreign policy factors also played a role in the election. For if they had naturalized a world religion in their country that was professed by one of the neighboring empires, it would have been tantamount to recognizing the majesty of that state formation (The Himyarite Kingdom was then bordered by Christian Byzantium and Aksum as well as Sasanian Persia.) However, the

ruler of Aksum occupied the region in 525 in retaliation for the infamous persecution of Christians by Dhu Nuwas, the last king of the royal family. The triumph of Christianity over Judaism also proved to be temporary, and the area came under Persian rule in 570. Under the changed circumstances, the Jews first had to hand over the right to collect taxes to the Arabs, and over time they also lost control over good quality lands and water resources. As a result, there was a growing interest among them in mysticism and eschatology when the spread of Islam in southern Arabia began barely half a century later.

3. The Minority Situation of Yemeni Jewry under Muslim Rule

The Prophet Muhammad's relationship with Arab Jewry was initially quite ambivalent, reflecting well the tensions of interest between individual local communities due to their attitudes. The first decisive agreement was the so-called *The Constitution of Medina* between the Prophet and the Jews in 622 which was made to end wars between rival clans and to maintain cooperation between the communities of Medina. The document, which can be considered the foundations of a religiously colored Islam in Medina, named eight Jewish groups as part of the Medina community, effectively clarifying their separation from Muslims. However, certain Jewish tribes did not consider the forward-looking agreement to be authoritative, especially when Prophet Muhammad's activities were considered to be detrimental to their commercial interests. The constitution formed a multireligious community in Medina. Certain groups therefore engaged in active propaganda against him and secretly allied themselves with his enemies. Prophet Muhammad resolutely acted against the violators of the Medina Constitution and first expelled the Banu Qaynuqa Jewish tribe from Medina, using a local incident as an excuse. He then took advantage of his victories over the armies of Mecca, as well as the resulting increase

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Jewish faith was nowhere a state religion in the region, so it was ideal for emphasizing sovereignty.

in prestige, to completely break the resistance of the Jewish tribes opposed to him after years of struggle.[14]

Despite the growing mediating authority and influence of the Prophet, the new religion only gradually began to spread in the southern Arab region due to the resistance of the Abyssinian Christians living there after Prophet Muhammad's armies conquered the area in 629. The Prophet therefore sent his son-in-law, cousin, and companion Ali Ibn Abi-Talib, to the territory of present-day Yemen in 631 to invite them to Islam. Prophet Muhammad instructed Ali to not engage them in fighting, unless they attack him.[15] Nevertheless, it was a clearly unfavorable change in their situation that their social status changed from average citizen to dhimmi who had to pay a head tax, the jizya, in exchange for protection. Many people who once professed the Jewish religion converted to the Muslim faith for personal convictions or due to financial considerations. The process was supported by Muslims by peaceful means, armed violence only took place if the converts later left their new religion.[16]

In the early stages of Islam, according to Arab sources, Muslim rulers were not very concerned with the Jews of southern Arabia, who lived their daily lives in a traditional, patriarchal society according to their own religious precepts and laws. For the most part, they seemed to have been fairly agreed with them in strict accordance with Sharia's provisions on protected religions. The Shiite Zaydi trend, which became dominant in Yemen at the beginning of the 10th century, also acknowledged the existence of Ahl al-Kitab[17] ("people of the Book"), like other religious trends in Islam.[18] The rulers of the country, like the Ottoman caliphs, regarded them as peoples

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14 Newby, Gordon Darnell. "A History of the Jews of Arabia": 78–94.

15 Muir, William. *The life of Mahomet*. Montana: Kessinger Publishing Co, 1878: 225–226.

16 Leader Djariya ibn Kudama came into conflict with the Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib in Western Arabia, so he agreed with the Jewish tribe who converted to Islam under his sovereignty. However, the latter later abandoned his new religion, "*so we killed them and buried them with fire after their death*".
Shivitiel, A. – Lockwood, W. – Serjeant R. B. "The Jews of San'ā". *San'ā, an Arabian Islamic City*. Ed. Serjeant, Robert. B. – Lewcock, Ronald. London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1983: 391.

17 Those religionists who are possessors of divine books (i.e., the Torah, the Gospel, and the Avesta).

18 The Shiite Zaydi dynasty was founded by al-Hadi Yahya ibn al-Husayn in Yemen in 897. However, the existence of the Zaydi monarchy dates to 901, when al-Hadi occupied Sana'ā, where he declared himself ruler.

with separate religions and their own laws, who were initially protected.[19] The coexistence of Judaism and Muslims in Yemen during the reign of the Sunni Rasulid dynasty (1229–1454) was practically harmonious and this period was characterized by a complete lack of persecution. Jews enjoyed the benefits of stability as well as economic and social prosperity without discrimination.[20]

However, the tolerant attitude of the rulers underwent a radical change over time. During the Tahirid dynasty (1454–1517),[21] a number of restrictive measures had already been taken to discriminate against members of the Jewish community considered pariah and to deprive them of their rights until the beginning of the first Ottoman occupation of the area in 1546. This has degenerated to the point where they have been completely pushed out of the areas they rule on the pretext that only Muslims can live there.[22] Later, because of their notoriously good relations with Porta, the local rulers looked at them with distrust, so that sometimes they could only enjoy the protection of the occupying forces during Ottoman rule.

Al-Wuraafi, Ebrahim Mohammed. "Persecution and Longing of Yemenite Jews in the Handsome Jew". *Trames*, 25 (2021): 52.

19 The first Zaydi imam, al-Hadi Yahya, protected their community with the following words: "*If any Muslim harasses you, report the matter to me and I will serve you justice*". For this reason, later, when a Muslim Jew was abused, the latter said, "*Aná fi'ismat al-Imam* (or *al-Amil*)" – I am under the protection of the imam (or governor). If the parties appealed to the imam or the governor, an immediate judgment was rendered. If a Muslim was convicted under the decision, he was fined and ordered to kill an animal he had to distribute among the poor.
Serjeant, Robert Bertram. "A Judeo-Arab House-Deed from Habbān (With Notes on the former Jewish Communities of the Wāhhidī Sultanate)" *Customary and Shari'ah Law in Arab Society*. Hampshire: Variorum, 1991: 118; Shivitiel, A. – Lockwood, W. – Serjeant R. B. "The Jews of San'ā": 392.

20 Tobi, Yosef. *The Jews of Yemen*. Leiden: Brill, 1999: 5.

21 For detailed information on the Tahirid dynasty, see: Porter, Venetia Ann (1992) The history and monuments of the Tahirid dynasty of the Yemen 858–923/1454–1517, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://ethe ses.dur.ac.uk/5867/.

22 The background to the expulsion of the Jews was, in fact, the collective punishment of the community for a messianic movement led by an unnamed Jewish person, to which some Muslim residents also joined. Moreover, both sides suspected them of cooperating with the other party when the Zaydi-Ottoman opposition escalated.
Tobi, Yosef. *The Jews of Yemen*: 6.

Their situation deteriorated markedly in the first half of the 17th century, when the Zaydis managed to expel the Ottomans from the region and regained power in 1635. While the Sunni communities took a rather flexible stance toward the "people of the Book" under the agreement between the Caliph Omar and the Christian communities, the Shiite Zaydis sought a literal interpretation of the sharia and full compliance with it. Moreover, during the anti-Ottoman uprisings of the imams, the image of their community was intertwined with the person of the sultan because of their services to him. The imams therefore made additional ordinances that served to discriminate, punish, and shame them at the same time. In this regard, during the reign of Imam al-Mutawakkil Ismail (1644–1676), a defining turning point was the messianic movement that unfolded in Sana'ā in 1667, announcing the imminent coming of the Saviour and calling for mass emigration to Palestine. The imam, however, saw the movement as an attempt to change the existing order, and therefore considered it a rebellion, especially after the movement's leader, Slayman Jamal, tried to seize control from the Muslim governor of Sana'ā. In retaliation, the imam deprived them of all the rights of protected religious minorities. In accordance with his will, his successor, Imam al-Mahdi Ahmad (1676–1680), first demolished their synagogues and banned their rabbis from public life in 1676. Then, leaving their property behind, they were exiled to the Tihama plain for the first time in 1678, and from there two years later to Mawza, the malaria-coastal areas, while selling their houses to Muslims. Thanks to the intercession of the governor of 'Amran, they were able to return to Sana'ā in 1680. However, barely half of the community forced into exile has only returned to restart their lives in Qa 'al-Yahud, a special district outside the city gates, a fair distance from Muslim houses. During their absence, the imam nailed their only remaining synagogue of Sana'a, Kenisat al-'Ulama. He later ordered the demolition of the synagogue and built a mosque in its site known as Masjid al-Jala'. Their large bath was expropriated and handed over to the *Waqf*.[23] After their return, they lived in peace in Sana'ā for nearly forty years. The rapid growth of their wealth is shown by the fact that no less than 22 synagogues were built during this period. However, in 1762, Imam al-Mahdi Abbas again demolished all their places of worship

23 An endowment made by a Muslim for a religious, educational, or charitable cause.

and the austerity decrees issued at that time were in force for about thirty years until they were revoked by al-Mahdi's son, Ali.[24]

However, apart from transitional peaceful periods, Jews, under the Shiite rule in Yemen, often had to face the fact that they were treated as multi-subordinated subjects. To emphasize this, they were even forbidden to touch a Muslim person or his food. In addition, they were obliged to behave humbly towards Muslims, against whom they could not raise their voices. They also prescribed which side they could walk on and how to greet them. The subordination was also emphasized by the restrictions that their houses could not be higher than those of Muslims, that they could not ride a camel or a horse, and that they could only sit sideways on a mule or a donkey. In addition, in order to be clearly identifiable to everyone, they were required to walk barefoot in the Muslim quarters of the settlements and to grow a long sidelocks. Their vulnerability to the majority society was heightened by the fact that they were not allowed to defend themselves even when young people tossed stones or abused them with their fists.[25]

They could no longer wear turban or the jambiya/janbia dagger, most closely associated with the people of Yemen, considered an iconic symbol of free men, tucked into their belts. The new laws also gave the Zaydis the opportunity to convert children under the age of 13 to Islam if their father died. Their disenfranchisement and vulnerability was well illustrated by the fact that the evidence they presented was automatically considered null and void against Muslims in litigation. To downgrade them, a decree in 1788 ordered the Jews of Sanaa to keep public toilets and baths clean and to remove animal dungs and carcasses from the streets.[26] They

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24 Serjeant, Robert Bertram. "A Judeo-Arab House-Deed from Habbān …": 119; Schmidt, Dana Adams. *Yemen: the Unknown War*. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1968: 104–106; Shivitiel, A. – Lockwood, W. – Serjeant R. B. "The Jews of San'ā": 392–394; Tobi, Yosef. "The Jews of Yemen": 48–84.

25 The vulnerability of the Jewish community was heightened by the fact that a Muslim who killed a Jew only had to pay a blood feud to the family of the deceased, according to Sharia regulations. However, he also had to do so only if at least two Muslim witnesses testified against him. Many murders went unpunished because the Shiites refused to testify against their fellow believers in the case of a Jew who was considered unbelievers (Blady, Ken. *Jewish Communities in Exotic Places*. Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc. 2000: 10.)

26 The so-called Latrina decree also had the consequence that a narrow, inviolable group of its executors was formed, which was considered pariah and expelled within its own community.

were increasingly the subject of atrocities on the part of the population dissatisfied with the decrees of the Imam in addition to the chaotic domestic political conditions and the detrimental consequences of clashes between opposing parties.[27]

For this reason, therefore, the Jews often enjoyed the protection of Arab tribes living at a fair distance from the settlements, often hostile to the imam, whose values and traditions were accepted and respected. Moreover, because they could not carry a weapon, the tribal warriors considered their killing unworthy because of their vulnerable position. If such a precedent did occur, it was mostly attempted to resolve it within a tribal framework in order to avoid the outbreak of a potential tribal war.[28]

At the same time, despite the numerous restrictions, it was also clear to the imams that they were doing a valuable service to society when they could perform several activities and tasks that were forbidden to faithful Muslims. Thus, for example, they could even produce alcohol and pursue any occupation of their choice other than military service. Over time, they have gained a virtually dominant position in Yemeni handicrafts and trade. They were recognized and sought-after goldsmiths, metalworkers, and jewelers, and to a lesser extent shoemaker, tailors, potters, weavers, carpet makers, embroiderers, and stonemasons who made art jewelery and other

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Blady, Ken. "Jewish Communities in Exotic Places": 11–12.

27 In the fight against the Ottomans, the tribes were a sure support for the imams, whose loyalty was ensured by the annual annuity paid by the ruler. A change in this practice occurred during the reign of Imam Abdullah ibn al-Mutawakkil, who in 1818 ordered the imprisonment of tribal delegates who came to the court to receive this financial support. The imam entrusted the implementation of the idea to the Jews, who carried out the command received with great zeal to show their loyalty to the ruler. However, the tribes revolted and when the imam refused to withdraw the measure, they attacked the Jewish quarter of Sanaa.
Shivitiel, A. – Lockwood, W. – Serjeant R. B. "The Jews of San'ā": 394.

28 In a 19th-century incident, Hasid and Bakil, the two largest tribal alliances in Yemen, held a rally where one of the tribal fighters was ordered to pay four times the blood fee for killing a Jew. The warrior could even be glad that he received only such a penalty because strict tribal laws sentenced offenders to death in such cases. However, as this fighter appeared (or indeed was) insane during the trial, his judges spared his life and considered it sufficient to impose a fine. Half of the amount was then given to the relatives of the victim and the other half to the tribe of the killer, whose honor was abused.
Dresch, Paul. *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989: 61.

handicrafts. The exceptionally talented made their products exclusively for the court or the local tribal sheikh.[29] They paid for their jizya but were exempt from a number of other taxes that Muslim rayas had to pay to the state. For this reason, in some periods, Muslim peasants were in a much worse position than Jewish artisans at certain times, if we consider the tax burden as a basis.[30]

4. The Beginning of Emigration to Palestine

The Second Return of the Ottomans to Yemen and the occupation of Sanaa in 1879, under the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1908) had mixed results for the Jewish community. The restoration of public security and stability had been a positive development for them, especially in terms of trade. On the other hand, intending to preserve the weakening Ottoman Empire, the Europeans directed Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876), had little effect on them, as the Ottoman authorities did not want to risk confrontation with Muslim-majority society. Thus, although the Jews became officially equal to the other inhabitants, in practice their legal status did not change compared to the situation before the Ottoman takeover. As a result, previous discriminatory laws have not only been repealed, but also have been supplemented by new ones. In particular, their financial situation, and thus their livelihood, was sensitively affected when prices started to rise sharply and then Ottomans soon doubled the amount of jizya so far and imposed other special taxes on trade, crops, and butchers. They were also adversely affected by the opening of the Suez Canal and the explosive development of British-ruled Aden in southern Arabia. At the same time, the intermediary role of the Red Sea ports in northern Yemen has dramatically diminished in the increased trade, so that the Jewish communities that once lived and prospered there migrated to Aden or Muscat. In addition, local markets have entered the global economy thanks to the Aden trade center and the northern Yemeni ports opened by the Ottomans. As a result, food began to flow out

29 Wenner, Manfred W. *Modern Yemen 1918–1966*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967: 36–37.

30 Serjeant, Robert Bertram. "A Judeo-Arab House-Deed from Habbān …": 118.

of the area, which was replaced by cheap and mass-produced imported goods. With the latter, the products of Jewish craftsmen and artisans could no longer compete.[31]

In addition to economic considerations, Yemeni Jewry came into contact with other Jewish communities around the world, which inspired them to change their previous social position. The social equality proclaimed by the Ottomans, the ideal of citizenship, and the example of the many successful and wealthy Jews who were part of the civilian and military rule of the empire all encouraged them to break with their hitherto subordinate position. In addition, Palestine was also under Ottoman rule at the time, which made it much easier to communicate and get there in the absence of borders.[32]

Finally, in addition to the lack of adverse economic changes and hoped-for political changes, Yemeni Jewry was also disappointed by the way the Ottoman administration disregarded their religious customs, which they were repeatedly forced to violate.[33] Associated with this was the increase in trade with the region, and Yemeni Jewry gained a global outlook in religious terms as well. The intensity of relations with Jewish communities in different areas increased, and new relationships were formed, all based on common faith, regardless of origin. All these networks, as well as the Hebrew-language newspapers that became available, had a clear effect on the rethinking of Yemeni Jewish identity, the development of a kind of national consciousness, and an incentive for their emigration.[34]

Throughout the centuries, Yemeni Jewry had remained in close contact with its fellow believers in Palestinian territory, to whom donations had been regularly collected and sent.[35] Therefore, Zionist propaganda spread as early as the 1870s in Yemen, from where the first enterprising team arrived

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31 Ariel, Ari. *Jewish-Muslim Relations and Migration from Yemen to Palestine in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Leiden: Brill, 2014: 31–36.

32 In this field, some have even disputed their dhimmī status (Ariel, Ari. "Jewish-Muslim Relations …": 36–38.)

33 The Ottoman authorities had no regard for the Jews, and they were also forced to involve in the fight against the rebels. An emblematic case of this happened in October 1875, when about 40 Sana'ā Jews were forcibly enlisted and forced to carry wounded soldiers during the holiday of Sukkot, violating the Sabbath as well. Three of them lost their lives during the journey from Sana'a to Hudaydah.
Ariel, Ari. "Jewish-Muslim Relations …": 29; Tobi, Yosef. "The Jews of Yemen": 90.

34 Ariel, Ari. "Jewish-Muslim Relations …": 38–43.

35 The earliest records date from the end of the 15th century about Yemeni Jews who migrated to Jerusalem and settled there for personal motivation and religious zeal.

in the ancient port city Jaffa in 1875.[36] However, significant emigration did not begin until years later, in 1881. One of the triggers was based on the Gematria-based calculation that the Jewish year 5542 would be the year of Redemption, which corresponded to 1882. On the other hand, the false myth was also inspiring for them according to Baron Rothschild, the Prince of the Jews, who alone integrated secular and spiritual power, lived in Jerusalem and bought land in the area, which he would give them. The rumor proved so persistent that three groups of Yemeni Jewish artisans, with more than 100 families, set out for the Holy Land at that time to take advantage of the supposed opportunity, where they arrived in 1882 after many ordeals.[37] However, the first experiences were extremely disappointing for them. The cost of travel consumed their financial reserves, so they were initially forced to live outdoors without cover. In addition, those already living there considered them dark-skinned primitives, entrusted with degrading work that others refused to do. Luckily for them, their disadvantage eventually became widely publicized and they were eventually able to build houses for themselves on the Mount of Olives from donations from a wealthy Jew in Baghdad.[38]

Meanwhile, in Yemen, Muslim authorities soon recognized the losses they had suffered from the departure of their artisans and the decline in their tax revenues so far. For this reason, Jewish emigration was consistently hindered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the enforcement of the prohibition regulations had not proved effective. Moreover, shortly after the anti-Ottoman Zaydi uprising and its success in 1906, their

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However, we have no reason to doubt that there may have been relocations or pilgrimages by individuals or small groups even earlier.
Ariel, Ari. "Jewish-Muslim Relations …": 23.

36 Blady, Ken. "Jewish Communities in Exotic Places": 24.

37 There is a consensus in the literature that it would be difficult to estimate the number of Yemenis who emigrated at that time. Complicating the problem is that, due to the ordeals experienced during the journey or the depletion of their material reserves, many turned back or eventually settled elsewhere (e.g., in Egypt or even India), changing their original intentions. This was well illustrated, among other things, by the fact that barely one-fifth of the last most populous group of about 300 eventually reached the land of Israel. At the same time, the Jerusalem census of 1884 enumerated a total of 454 Yemeni Jews which could be a point of reference.
Ariel, Ari. "Jewish-Muslim Relations …": 45–50.

38 Blady, Ken. "Jewish Communities in Exotic Places": 24.

persecution resumed, exacerbated by intermittent famines.[39] All this had such an incentive for further emigration that the emigration process, which was basically local until 1906, that is, mainly limited to Sana'ā and its surrounding area, became countrywide by 1907–1908. Already a significant number of Jewish groups had set out for the Promised Land from Sadaa and Haydan in northern Yemen as well as from Hubaysh in southern Yemen.[40] Although this outflow process was spontaneous, which lacked any conscious organizing activity, nearly 3,000 Yemeni Jews emigrated to the territories of Palestine by 1907.[41]

The Young Turk (Constitutionalist) Revolution of July 1908 also did not significantly change the situation of the Jewish community in Yemen. Besides, the Ottoman administration concluded the Treaty of Da'an with Imam Yahya in October 1911 due to the unreasonably high costs of military occupation, the ongoing clashes, and the outbreak of the Italian-Ottoman war. The agreement ended the Ottoman-Yemeni conflict and recognized the rule of Imam Yahya over the Zaydi territories under Ottoman authority. For the Jewish community, this also meant that they became such a property of the imam, and their activities were again restricted by several discriminatory decrees that had hitherto been disregarded by the Ottomans.[42] At the same time, there was a growing demand for labor on the

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39 After the resumption of fighting against Imam Yahya, Ottoman governors, for example, obliged Jews to accommodate soldiers in their houses and to supply their flour reserves. Because of this, the drought of 1905 led to tragedy and about 20,000 Jews – 6,000 of them in Sanaa alone – died of hunger across the country.
Blady, Ken. "Jewish Communities in Exotic Places": 23.

40 Ariel, Ari. "Jewish-Muslim Relations …": 52–53.

41 Barer, Shlomo. "The Magic Carpet": 146–147; Schmidt, Dana Adams. "Yemen: the Unknown War": 109; Shivitiel, A. – Lockwood, W. – Serjeant R. B. "The Jews of San'ā": 397.

42 In addition to being taxed separately, they were forbidden to (1) raise their voices against Muslims, (2) build a house larger than Muslims, (3) touch a Muslim as he goes his way, (4) Muslims are traditional (5) warp to blaspheme the Islamic religion, (6) curse the Prophet, (7) argue about religion with Muslims, (8) ride an animal in a male saddle, (9) study their books outside the synagogue, (10) raise their voices, when they pray, (11) they blow the ram's horns out loud, (12) they lend on profit, (13) they always had to stand up in the presence of Muslims, whom they had to show honor and respect every time (Schmidt, Dana Adams. "Yemen: the Unknown War": 106.) For more details on their situation, see: Feldmann, Jehoschuah. *Die Jemenitischen Juden*. Köln: Verlag des Hauptbureaus des Jüdischen Nationalfonds, 1913: 10–21.

agricultural farms established in Palestine to replace Arab farmers. For this reason, and in hopes of establishing new settlements, the Palestinian Office of the Zionist Organization sent Shamuel Yavnieli, one of the first members of the Second Russian Aliyah,[43] to Yemen with the aim of reporting to the Jewish communities on the work that was going on in Palestine at the time and convincing them to emigrate. His mission was a resounding success and more than 1,500 people from the estimated community of 24,000 moved to Palestine in 1911–12. However, Yavnieli and the other delegates later ceased their activities in Yemen due to the saturation of the Palestinian labor market, and the promising emigration process was temporarily terminated after the outbreak of World War I.[44]

As the ruler of Yemen, which became independent after World War I, Imam Yahya enjoyed a kind of respect and admiration among Jews. Despite the revival of centuries of restrictions, including the conversion of orphaned Jewish children under the age of 13 to the Muslim faith, he also protected them and provided them with a sense of security. Compared to the practice of earlier times, he also granted them exceptional privileges such as settling outside the walls of the ghetto or freely selling their products in Arab suqs. Breaking with the hitherto ambiguous judiciary, Muslims who harmed or insulted Jewish life or property were also severely punished without discrimination.[45] At first, he did not seriously hinder the emigration of Jews, although he did not really understand why Jews longed for Palestine. He even invited a prominent Palestinian rabbi to come to Yemen and personally explain to him the reasons for the emigration and the further intentions of the departed.[46] However, this exchange of views proved futile when imam Yahya recognized the primarily material losses resulting from the emigration of the Jews. In addition, Palestinian Arab leaders specifically called on the Yemeni ruler to prevent the emigration of Jews following the May 1921 riots in Jaffa, in which nearly 100 people lost their lives.[47] Thanks to all this, Imam Yahya ordered the confiscation of the property of emigrants in 1922,

43 Aliyah or *ascent* in Hebrew. It means the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the Promised Land.

44 Barer, Shlomo. "The Magic Carpet": 147–148.; Macro, Eric. "Yemen and the Western World": 85–86.

45 Blady, Ken. "Jewish Communities in Exotic Places": 24–25.

46 Wenner, Manfred W. "Modern Yemen 1918–1966": 37.

47 Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman. *Traditional Society in Transition: The Yemeni Jewish Experience*. Leiden: Brill, 2014: 92–93.

and seven years later he also officially banned emigration.[48] However, it was no longer possible to block the process by decree, which was inherently only possible in areas under the direct control of Imam Yahya.[49] The unfavorable economic[50] and political[51] situation, as well as news from relatives settled in Palestine, revived the old messianic longing of those who remained at home.[52] Thus, many immediately sold their property and secretly left the country as soon as administrative control paid little attention to them.[53]

Although the Jewish community of about 7,000 in the Aden Protectorate was in a much better position than its Yemeni counterparts, the events of 1931 had a decisive influence on their ideas about moving to Palestine. In the same year, there was a clash between the Muslim and Jewish communities over the fact that a Jewish girl wanted to marry a Muslim man. This eventually led to serious clashes in which many Jews fell victim and some of their residences were destroyed to the ground. This only further

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48 Although the decree of Imam Yahya restricting emigration was not always strictly observed during his reign, it nevertheless made it virtually impossible for the Jews to leave that, after the occupation of the port of Hudaydah, the Red Sea ports could no longer be used for this purpose. In addition, Palestinian Arab leaders later emphatically reiterated their call for restrictions on the travel of Jews, and the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, personally discussed the matter with Imam Yahya in 1933 and 1935.
Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman. "Traditional Society in Transition": 93.

49 At the same time, the central government clearly proved incapable of enforcing its will in the tribal areas, where Jews continued to enjoy full freedom of movement and were not prevented from leaving, especially after the transit fee was paid.
Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman. "Traditional Society in Transition": 94–95.

50 For instance: devaluation of the riyal currency, over taxation, or decline in trade etc.

51 For instance: arbitrariness of local nobles or the aforementioned Orphan Decree.

52 For the settlement of Yemeni Jews who emigrated to Palestine, see: Feldmann, Jehoschuah. "Die Jemenitischen Juden": 21–31.

53 Emigration only slowly unfolded after World War I and the Jewish Agency Immigration Office registered only 6 people in 1921. However, as early as 1923, 183 Yemenites were registered because of messages sent from Palestine. Their numbers have since steadily increased and a total of 1,413 Yemeni emigrants have been counted between 1919 and 1928. To support the process, the Jewish Agency opened an office in Aden in 1929 to facilitate the emigration of Yemeni Jews to Palestine. Thanks to their logistical involvement, the number of emigrants multiplied in the years that followed and 6,416 Yemeni Jews moved to Palestinian territory between 1932 and 1939.
McCarthy, Justin. *The Population of Palestine: Population, History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1990: 230.

strengthened the longing for Palestine that was already present in the life of the community.[54] However, especially after the riots of 1921, the British wanted to avoid the uncontrolled entry of Jews into the Palestinian Mandate. Therefore, for Jews concentrated in Aden, who were waiting to emigrate, the passing permit was made conditional on the actual economic situation and the absorption capacity of the labor market in the Palestinian region, as well as the employability of the applicants for resettlement. However, the events of the first half of the 1930s led to a significant increase in the influx of European Jewish emigrants into Palestinian territory, which was one of the main causes of the Great Arab Uprising of 1936. As a result, the British authorities imposed further restrictions on restricting Jewish immigration.

5. The First Phase of "On Eagles' Wings": The Evacuation of Illegal Emigrants

The decision for a major exodus initiative was made in 1943, when a typhus epidemic that erupted a year earlier reached the Jewish quarter ofSana'ā . Their determination was only confirmed by the fact that after the shortage of cereals, wealthy traders bought commercial goods to stimulate the black market. The resulting food shortage sparked a wave of anti-Jewish violence, forcing many families to leave their homes and move to the Aden Protectorate.[55] Their emigration was prompted by the increase in Jewish Agency activity in Yemen, as well as a change in the attitude of Imam Yahya. To alleviate the afflictions of Jews, who had been even more exposed to food shortages, the ruler had been taken a neutral position on the issue, neither prohibiting nor allowing the emigration of Jews, and no more trying to stop the exiles or confiscate their remaining property.[56]

However, the Aden competent authorities tried to contain emigrants due to the Palestinian immigration quota introduced in 1939 under the MacDonald White Paper, and to prevent the spread of typhus. In the spirit of this, the borders were closed for months, the families who came there were

54 Little, Tom. "South Arabia, Arena of Conflict": 123–124.
55 Macro, Eric. "Yemen and the Western World": 86–87.
56 Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman. "Traditional Society in Transition": 97–98.

tried to be turned back, and the people who entered the territory of Aden were placed in isolation camps to prevent the outbreak of the epidemics. However, despite the restrictions, the refugees continued to infiltrate the Protectorate illegally in order to secretly board a ship on the Red Sea coast. Thus, more than 5,000 people managed to emigrate to Palestine in 1943–1944, while about 4,000 people were waiting to be transported to Palestine even in 1947. Their situation became critical after the UN resolution of November 29, 1947, on the partition of Palestine. Anti-Jewish, spontaneous riots erupted on December 2 and the enraged crowd staged a pogrom in Aden with the assistance of Arab law enforcement forces. In the clashes, the mob looted the homes and shops of hundreds of Jews and then demolished them. In addition, 122 people lost their lives and another 164 were injured, so the British placed them in segregation camps to avoid further casualties, which were defended by armed forces to keep local Arabs away.[57] Soon, conditions became unbearable for their peers too who remained in Yemen. In early 1948, riots broke out in Sana'ā after the bodies of two Arab girls were discovered in the cistern of the Jewish Quarter. Muslims demanded revenge, so six rabbis and prominent leaders of the Jewish community were arrested on charges of ritual murder. The anger of the crowd, fueled by malicious rumors, was so threatening that they had to surround the Jewish Quarter with soldiers to protect them.[58] All this also dispelled the remaining hopes of the British authorities in Aden that at least some of the Jews from northern Yemen placed in the camps under critical conditions would be persuaded to return.

With the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, the British restriction on immigration to there ceased to apply. However, London feared that allowing more refugees to pass would result spontaneous anti-British protests in various Arab capitals. In October 1948, for this reason, men of military age continued to be withheld and the British authorities only contributed to the departure of the others. However, the evacuation of the latter also encountered difficulties. The previous route in the Red Sea could no longer be used at that time, as Egypt had closed the Suez Canal

57 Ariel, Ari. "Jewish-Muslim Relations …": 155–157.

58 The flogged temper and compliance with the expectations of the crowd were well demonstrated by the fact that the judge in the case accused the Jews of the murders even after a Muslim woman had already confessed to committing them.
Ariel, Ari. "Jewish-Muslim Relations …": 152–153.

to all Israeli shipping. To solve the problem, the Jewish state launched Operation "On Eagles' Wings" and established an air bridge between the Aden Protectorate and Israel. The first aircraft to arrive for this purpose landed on December 15, 1948, and not only the 3,881 people present at the scene, but also the hundreds of refugees who arrived in the meantime – a total of about 5,500 – were transported in the first phase of the operation until March 1949.[59] Temporary camps were dismantled, and the border was mutually closed in agreement with the Yemeni imam to avoid any further unrest.[60]

6. The Second Phase of "On Eagles' Wings": The Exodus of the Yemeni Israelite Community

The British distance policy had not proved to be long-lasting. Seeing Israel's success in the War of Independence, the viability of the young state soon became clear, forcing London to reconsider its relations so far. In relations between the two states, the new chapter was opened by the release of 11,000 refugees detained in Cyprus. This was followed by negotiations at ministerial level with the approval of the British Foreign Office in Aden and Israel during April and May. During the talks, an agreement was reached to open the Aden border on the condition that refugees gathered in camps operated by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency for Israel would be transferred to Israel immediately after their medical examination. Thus, by mid-June 1949, the conditions for the relaunch of "On Eagles' Wings" were created just in time; 5,000–20,000 Yemeni Jews were already heading for the Aden border by that time.[61]

In May 1949, the ruler of Yemen, Imam Ahmed, the successor to Yahya who was assassinated in 1948, granted permission to the Jewish community to relocate to Israel on the condition that they transfer their

59 Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman. "Traditional Society in Transition": 113.
60 Barer, Shlomo. "The Magic Carpet": 154–155.
61 Barer, Shlomo. "The Magic Carpet": 166–176.

professional knowledge to local Muslims before leaving.[62] The combined effect of several factors played a role in the decision of the imam pursuing isolationist politics. His decision was influenced by his intent to annoy Arab states facing Israel, his cool relationship with Arab League member states, the emphasis on his country's sovereignty, and the untrue rumors of Palestinian Arab refugees about the Israeli atomic bomb and the retaliatory military strike on the Yemeni capital.[63]

The founding of the Jewish state and then the approval of the imam for their free departure and the news of Israel's assumption of travel expenses gave the final impetus to leave Yemen for those who had hitherto insisted on their homes and livelihoods. Thousands of Jews in northern Yemen began their journey south. Although the memory of the drought in the country and the discriminatory treatment of them played a role in their decision, the main reason for their high proportion of exodus was still religious. For these persons set out and undertook the ordeals with the unquestionable faith that the Messiah had finally come, whom they had been waiting for centuries. The vast majority of Yemeni Jews practically left the country by early November 1949. At that time, it seemed that their emigration would not have negative consequences. However, time soon refuted this, and the imam lost his world-famous craftsmen with their departure.

The emigrants were forced to leave all their possessions behind or at least had to sell them at a huge loss.[64] They then made their way through rented wheelbarrows, donkeys, on foot through mountains and deserts,

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62 The American Joint Distribution Committee also allegedly played a major role in authorizing mass emigration, bribing Imam Ahmed in exchange for the release of the Jews.
Yaʿakov Meron, "Why Jews Fled the Arab Countries", *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 2, no. 3, 1995, https://www.meforum.org/263/why-jews-fled-the-arab-countries Downloaded: 18.09.2021.

63 Barer, Shlomo. "The Magic Carpet": 178–179; Blady, Ken. "Jewish Communities in Exotic Places": 25.

64 Only a few of their abandoned houses were later used by poor Muslims and beggars. The others became dilapidated, many of which soon collapsed. Harold Ingrams, a British colonial official looked at Qa 'Al-Yahud, the old Jewish quarter, among other things, during his visit to Sana'a in the early 1960s. By then, there were only a few houses left. However, the few he inspected were found clean and comfortable even more than a decade after their former owners emigrated (Ingrams, Harold. *The Yemen. Imam, Rulers & Revolution*. London: John Murray, 1963: 21; O'Ballance, Edgar. *The War in the Yemen*. London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1971: 22.)

paying a separate head tax to the imam, various sultans and sheikhs, officials, and armed bandits until they reached the border. Faced with their ordeals, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee soon sent buses and trucks for them to northern Yemen and provided financial assistance to all those who did not have enough money to pay the toll.

The camps soon became overcrowded due to the constant influx of refugees. The British therefore temporarily closed the border to them to avoid a major catastrophe. Thousands were stranded on the Yemeni side of the border without any kind of care, hundreds of whom died from exhaustion and epidemics. After the border lock was released, those who arrived were malnourished, with an average body weight of 70 kg. Most of them suffered from malaria, tropical ulcer, trachoma, typhoid, or other infectious diseases. Israeli doctors and nurses have therefore arrived at the Joint's ever-expanding temporary accommodation to prepare them to continue their journey. Thanks to the efficient care they provided, the air bridge was put back into operation at the end of June. The six cargo carriers chartered from Alaska Airlines were able to transport 300–500 crowded people a day on a nine-hour flight to Lod from the Royal Air Force's Sheikh Othman Airport, who were received on several occasions personally by Golda Meir, Minister of Labour and Social Security, at the airport upon their arrival. By the end of the operation in September 1950, the planes had traveled more than 400 times in total. 48,915 people were thus able to return to the land of their ancestors, where they settled in closed patriarchal groups, like the approximately 35,000 Yemeni Jews who had previously emigrated and became established by then. However, more than 500 people, like Moses, were not given the opportunity to reach the Promised Land at the end of their journey. They found ultimate peace in the cemeteries set up next to the temporary camps.[65]

65 Barer, Shlomo. "The Magic Carpet": 249.; Schmidt, Dana Adams. "Yemen: the Unknown War": 109–110.

7. Afterword

After the departure of the Yemeni Jews, many of the villages they inhabited became completely depopulated. A foreign traveller visiting the country did not meet a Jew, although it was well known that few of them still lived in remote mountain villages. However, the total number of these surviving isolated communities was estimated to be only between 1,400 and 1,700 in 1971.[66] Their numbers have steadily declined in later decades due to continued emigration or just free conversions to the Muslim faith. The situation was similar in Aden Protectorate; a 1955 census in the city of Aden had only counted 831 Jews.[67] After the unification of the two parts of Yemen, hundreds left for Israel, especially after the strengthening of Muslim extremism. The end of the emigration was practically the ultimatum of the Shiite Houthis. The latter forced the members of the community of barely a few hundred people still on Yemeni land after the outbreak of the civil war to either convert to Islam or leave the country. For this reason, Israel continued to evacuate those wishing to leave with the help of the Jewish Agency, and the last major group, a family of 13, left the country in March 2021 for Cairo. According to the statements, only six elderly Jewish men remained in Yemen, one of whom had been imprisoned in the Houthis' prison for years.[68]

Yemeni Jewry, different in many respects from other Israeli communities, brought valuable capabilities with them to the newly established state. They adapted easily due to their proficiency in a multitude of craft occupations. Israel's economic gain was Yemen's loss. No more was made of alloy silver jewelery adorned with semi-precious stones. In Israel, the few Jews who tried to continue their old craft changed their style and followed European models. A tradition has come to an end.

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66 Stookey, Robert W. "Yemen, The politics …": 187.

67 Little, Tom. "South Arabia, Arena of Conflict": 123.

68 Boxerman, Aaron. "As 13 Yemeni Jews leave pro-Iran region for Cairo, community of 50,000 down to 6". *The Times of Israel*, 30 March 2021. https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-13-yemeni-jews-leave-pro-iran-region-for-cairo-nations-community-down-to-6/ (Downloaded: 17.09.2021); Klein, David Ian. "In Yemen, antisemitism is rampant even though few Jews actually live there". *Forward*, 14 April 2021. https://forward.com/news/467761/in-yemen-antisemitism-is-rampant-even-though-few-jews-actually-live-there/ (Downloaded: 17.09.2021.)